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ETHNICITY AND THE LABOUR FORCE: A DISCUSSION PAPER

by

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The characteristics of those in the labour force and their work-related activities can inform us, to a considerable degree, as to the nature of society's socioeconomic structure and the manner of its functioning. Differential rates of participation in the labour force and the nature of occupational distributions for the various age, sex, birthplace and ethnic origin sub-groups comprising the population can illuminate the mechanisms by which the social and economic systems operate to distribute economic activity and reward to its constituent members.

Canada, founded by the French and British, has continued to attract a variety of immigrants of diverse ethnic and cultural origins. Its economic structure has dramatically shifted from a predominantly agricultural to a highly industrial and urban base. Attracted by the opportunities to improve their quality of life in a society less encumbered by old-world class distinctions and animosities, the immigrants' expectations have continued to include such notions as "equality of opportunity" and a "fairer share of the economic rewards for one's honest labour". Theoretically, under such conditions, it would be expected that the many diverse ethnic and cultural origin groups entering the labour force would eventually distribute themselves throughout the occupational structure in numbers proportionate to their relative share of the total population. If not in their time, then certainly for the next generation.

It is common knowledge, however, that the "expected" and the "observed" are not necessarily the same. We know from the history of Canada's settlement and immigration experience that the two founding groups, the English and French, established the basic social and economic institutions and achieved dominance and control over their respective domains. Many of the non-English and non-French immigrants who came to Canada in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were relatively unskilled and uneducated, had a relatively low entrance status and were at a significant disadvantage in the competition for social and economic rewards. Yet many were able to take advantage of the new opportunities for themselves through hard work, more experience, and improvement of their occupational and language skills. Continuing efforts by immigrants to be accepted and to achieve economic success tend to produce a convergence between the social and economic characteristics of immigrants and those of the culturally dominant group; i.e., either the English or the French-origin population. This expectation of "convergence", from assimilation theory, provides us with a very useful model by which we can judge the relative successes achieved by various immigrant groups in gaining access to Canada's opportunity structure.

Disproportionate representation of individuals of certain origins in the labour force, or throughout the occupational structure, would suggest ethnic-related inequalities for socioeconomic achievement. The immediate task is to determine the extent to which

these inequalities may be due to general social discrimination against certain ethnic or cultural groups, initial intergroup differences in individual skills and experience, or to historically unique circumstances surrounding the immigration of certain ethnic or cultural groups.

Unequal access can arise from a variety of "ascribed" statuses as well as from variations in achieved statuses that reflect educational attainment, job training, and differences in work experience. Unequal access can be based on conventional prescriptions backed by societal consensus implied by custom, tradition, law, or common prejudice. Refusal to hire children is not evidence of prejudice if it's against the law to do so. Neither can persons over the age of 65 be made to work if they do not wish to do so. It is not against the law for married women with children to work, although there are many who feel that such women should remain in the home. There are other notions as to what constitutes proper work for men and for women that are not written in law, but are based on custom and tradition. In addition, the disproportionate distribution of persons with specific characteristics in the labour force can result from a variety of either voluntary and involuntary constraints or incentives, including differences between cultural groups, in the degree to which individuals subscribe to the importance of work and the work ethic in general. The particular ascribed characteristic that provides the focus for this paper (ethnic or cultural origin) is only one of several factors thought to have significance for explaining differential participation in the labour force or differences in socioeconomic achievement. Age and sex characteristics are considered to be more pervasive and significant in explaining differences in labour force behaviour, but their effects are not thought to be totally independent of the cultural contexts within which they are found.

The Immigrant Component of the Labour Force in Perspective

In 1981, the foreign-born comprised 16 per cent of the total population, and almost 20 per cent (19.1) of the total labour force population. While somewhat similar, the difference reflects age and sex differences in the two populations (weighted in the direction of young adults in the prime working ages), and probably higher motivational levels in the latter with respect to their needs and interest in working and establishing themselves in the economic structure.

Analyses of labour force data have shown variations in participation rates by period of immigration. Comparisions of postwar and prewar immigrants have generally shown the former to have considerably higher rates than the latter, primarily reflecting the significant aging of the prewar group, as well as the much lower levels of participation by women that were deemed appropriate for women in general among immigrants arriving in Canada prior to World War II. On the other hand, a more recent analysis of the 1971-1981 decade data has shown a positive relationship between length of residence and participation rates (McLaughlin 1985). It is quite possible, in this case, that the emphasis on family reunification, at the same time that increasing constraints have been placed on the admission of independent immigrants, has reduced the general participation rates for the more recent arrivals and overridden any possible aging effects.

Crude participation rates for the more recent intercensal decades have shown the native-born population to have had higher labour force participation, but this too, is a reflection of the different age structures of the two populations. Standardized rates (by age and sex) show that the immigrant population has consistently had higher participation rates for all age groups, except the 65 and over group in 1971 and both the 15-44 years of age group and the 65 and over group as of the 1981 census. For the major working age groups, individuals for all immigrant groups combined continue to exhibit higher propensities for working (and looking for work).

Consistent with these higher propensities for labour force participation is the expectation that the more recent sources of immigrants would tend to be over-represented in the current labour force. Recent data do, in fact, show slight over-representations of southern European and non-European origins in the labour force. The suggestion is that even though the more recent arrivals from southern European and the newer non-European source countries may still be relatively small in numbers, in comparison to the established population of European origins, their effect on the labour force can be expected to be significantly greater than that which normally would be expected. Southern Europeans, who comprise just under 20 per cent of the foreign-born population 15 years of age and over, account for 22 per cent of the foreign-born labour force. Similarly, those of Asian origin, who accounted for 13 per cent of the immigrant population 15 years of age and over at the time of the 1981 census, contributed 15 per cent of the foreign-born labour force. In relative terms, whether one looks at the total population, or just at the labour force component, the number of foreign-born comprises only a small part of the whole. Yet, their higher propensities for participating in the labour force and settling in Canada's largest metropolitan areas will combine with the increased visibility of the new arrivals to create a potentially greater impact on the labour force as well as on ethnic and racial relations than has ever occurred before.

Ethnic Composition of the Foreign-Born Labour Force

The past two decades have seen a very significant shift in the ethnic composition of arriving immigrants. The dominance of southern Europeans has given way to those of Asian and other non-European origins. However, because immigration levels have been greatly reduced since the elimination of restrictions based on ethnic, religious, racial and national origins, the overall impact on the composition of the foreign-born population and its component of the labour force has been small. Nevertheless, given the possibility of significant increases in immigration levels in the immediate future, it is important to understand the nature of the contribution that these new immigrant groups will make to the Canadian labour force.

Given the centrality of value systems for explaining behavioural differences between various ethnic, religious and nationality groups, variations in labour force participation rates are to be expected. Most cultural groups subscribe to the notion that all able-bodied men should be expected to work once they have completed their education or training. In contrast, is the greater variation between cultural groups regarding appropriate, or acceptable, roles and statuses for women. These differences would tend to

be reflected in the participation rates for women of the various ethnic and cultural origins that comprise the immigrant groups.

As recently as the 1971 census, standardized participation rates for men varied from a low of 70 per cent for those of French origin to a high of 82.5 per cent for males of other northwestern European origins. Compared to other origins, the latter had the highest rates for both their native and foreign-born. The French foreign-born had the lowest rate, while their native-born were second lowest to the "other" category (which includes Native Indian). Standardized participation rates for women were highest for both native and foreign-born Asian origins, while those of French origins were lowest overall. Again, native-born "other" origins, which included Native Indian, had the lowest rate (Kalbach and McVey 1979).

Analyses of country-of-birth data from the 1981 census have provided results roughly comparable to earlier analyses of ethnic origin data. Southeast Asian and Caribbean women exhibited the highest (standardized) rates and, again, were characterized by greater variation than those for men. Similarly, because of the generally high values of participation rates for men in general, there was little variation, although European birthplaces tended to be somewhat higher and Asian and Caribbean countries of birth lower.

Differential propensities for participating in the labour force reflected by standardized rates are important for understanding the various social and economic constraints operating against certain groups with respect to full and equitable participation in the labour force. Both voluntary and involuntary factors (ascribed and achieved characteristics other than age or sex) are reflected through standardized rates. At the same time, standardized rates do not indicate how these factors might operate differently for various groups with respect to placement in the occupational structure. This has obvious status-ranking overtones.

Historically, Canada's immigration policy has been primarily oriented towards fulfilling its manpower needs. It is not surprising then that immigrants are more likely to be found in the labour force than the native-born. Where they are placed in the labour force is, of course, another matter. Determining the degree of equality of opportunity is also difficult, given the range of skills, training and experience possessed by members of the various ethnic origin groups at their time of arrival. However, given the general convergence "assimilation" hypothesis, that initial handicaps arising from lack of specific skills, experience and other significant qualities can be overcome in time, the degree of convergence in occupational distributions can provide a rough measure of "equality of opportunity" or access to the opportunity structure enjoyed by Canada's various ethnic and cultural groups.

Ethnic Differences in Occupational Distributions

While labour force participation rates provide a basis for the measurement of relative economic integration of the various ethnic immigrant groups, they tell us little about the significance of ethnicity for accessing the opportunity structure and

achievement of social mobility. This requires an examination of their achieved occupational distributions that have status implications. Several methods have been used to analyze differences in the occupational distribution of Canada's various ethnic origin populations. Measures of relative concentration have been used to show the extent to which a particular group is "over" or "under" represented in each of the categories of the occupational structure with respect to an ideal distribution in which the proportion in each category is equal to its proportion of the total labour force population. The other measure commonly used (e.g., the Index of Dissimilarity) simply indicates the proportions of individuals in one distribution that would have to be moved to other categories in order to produce identical distributions. The general practice has been to compare each group's occupational distribution with that of the total population (Lautard and Loree 1984). While this procedure has a certain face validity, using the British origin's occupational distribution as the "standard" might provide a much more sensitive measure of ethnic inequality than has been the case in the past.

Both measures have been used frequently to determine the degree to which two occupational distributions have become more similar to each other with the passage of time (Porter 1965; Kalbach 1970; Lautard and Loree 1984). Evidence of a general decline in differences between the occupational distributions of Canada's various ethnic populations has been cited as evidence of a weakening of Canada's vertical mosaic as conceptualized by Porter (1965). That the debate has not yet been laid to rest can be seen in the summary of a recent analysis of ethnic stratification in Canada for the period 1931 to 1971. Lautard and Loree (1984) report that "despite declines, ethnic occupational differentiation remains substantial among both sexes", and that "the measurement of the relative occupational status of ethnic groups confirms that the ethnic mosaic remains a vertical one" (1984). Breton et al. (1980) have commented on the apparent reduction in ethnic inequality in the occupational structure during the 1961-1971 period as a result of greater selectivity of immigrants on the basis of their educational and occupational qualifications. Even more recently, Monica Boyd and others (1985), reporting on the results of their studies of mobility and status attainment in Canada, appear to conclude that if a vertical mosaic existed at all, it is now part of Canada's past history. Generally their research was not able to establish any significant level of association between ethnicity and occupational status. Their report essentially re-affirms the importance of education and family status, while shifting the focus from ethnicity (and ethnocentrism) to gender (and chauvinism) as the most significant factors underlying the inequality of access to the opportunity structure.

Because there are still notable examples of ethnic concentrations in occupations of varying statuses, and in certain work domains within unsegregated occupations as well (Reitz 1980), there seems to be some hesitancy to close the door completely on the possible salience of ethnicity for social mobility. Reitz suggests that existing inequalities in the labour market for some ethnic groups have produced ethnic concentrations in parallel economic structures as a means of providing the opportunities for social mobility denied them in the larger economic institutional structure. He also found that ethnic segregation existed within the work place for certain occupations that did not show significant ethnic concentrations overall. The existence of "hidden" segregation of this kind points out a very serious weakness of the Index of Dissimilarity as a general measure

of ethnic inequality. Clearly, more research will be needed to improve the sensitivity of our measures.

Inequalities of access to the opportunity structure reflected in both kinds of distributional measurements have been shown to contribute to a group's cohesion as well as enhancing the viability of the ethnic community (Breton et al. 1980). While inequality of opportunity often results in the concentration of certain minority immigrant groups in low-paying jobs (e.g., West Indian women in domestic jobs), this is not always the case (Reitz 1980). Italian males also show high levels of concentration, but in this case it is in occupations in the construction industry where they have greater control of the distribution of jobs and access to much higher wage scales. In the case of West Indian women, who generally have high school education, it would appear to be race prejudice that is primarily responsible for their concentration in low-paying jobs with minimal opportunities for social mobility. For Italian males, it is their generally low educational attainment levels that places them at a disadvantage in competition for jobs outside those occupational sectors where they have established control. In either case, the ethnic cohesiveness arising from inequalities of opportunity, and occupational or work place segregation, whether due to low educational attainment or to ethnic or racial prejudice, may contribute to the viability of ethnic community. But, this is hardly an acceptable basis on which to build a multicultural society. Equally unacceptable would be any programs specifically designed to raise or support the ethnic consciousness of any of Canada's many diverse ethnic populations at the expense of the individual's normal socialization and assimilation (i.e., Canadianization) necessary for the achievement of social mobility and socioeconomic success in the larger social and economic system.

Ethnic Prejudice, Discrimination, and Social Distance

It is perhaps unnecessary to remind ourselves that there is a general tendency among members of any ethnically diverse population, such as Canada's, to order the various ethnic, cultural and racial groups, in terms of their perceived social status, prestige and general social desirability. That Canada is no exception has been amply demonstrated by a number of recent studies (Richmond and Goldlust 1973; Berry, Kalin and Taylor 1976). These surveys have produced rather consistent sets of rank orderings of the various ethnic and racial groups in terms of their perceived desirability or social prestige. That they have validity for Canadian society in general can be seen by the fact that the social rankings established on the basis of surveys correspond very closely with the social desirability rankings that can be inferred from a careful review of Canada's history of immigration laws and regulations. That such rankings of perceived ethnic group preferences in Canada are consistent with similar survey results in the United States should attest to their significance for ethnic and racial relations in North America in general. Continuing moves to increase levels of immigration will also increase the numbers and proportions of the more visible non-European origin groups. In the absence of any evidence that this trend will not continue, it would be extremely short-sighted and ill advised not to provide funding for the expansion of those programs and services needed to control and reduce existing interethnic animosities and the potential for racial conflict within Canada's urban and rural communities.

Methodological Problems in Demonstrating the Salience of Ethnicity

Part of the problem underlying the failure of statistical analysis to establish the salience of ethnicity may lie in the manner by which "ethnicity" tends to be conceptualized or operationally defined and used in current research. It is generally accepted that the census question on ethnic and cultural origin is a rather ambiguous question that many (and particularly the native-born) find difficult to answer. Neither has it been very useful in identifying those individuals who are strongly identified with, or who are active in, the interpersonal networks of viable ethnic communities. However, in my opinion, this has never been the intent of the ethnic origin question. Its purpose has been to identify the basic ethnic origin or cultural stocks from which Canada's immigrants, or their children, have descended. Generally, this does not seem to have posed any great difficulty for the immigrant population. Recent immigrants, in particular, tend to have fairly strong ethnic identities. For those further removed from their own immigration experience (or their ancestors), the question of origins becomes more problematic. But, if we are interested in identifying "working" as opposed to "definitional" ethnics, the census can still be of some help to the researcher. Using the standard ethnic origin question, in conjunction with additional information on ethnic characteristics (e.g., country of birth, religion, mother tongue and language spoken in the home), it is possible to identify those individuals who are more likely to have maintained their ethnic associations and identity. Rather than looking for correlations between "ethnic origin" and occupational characteristics for testing the salience of ethnicity for stratification, multidimensional conceptions of ethnicity that identify "working" or "real" ethnics from "definitional" ethnics should be employed. If the argument is that "the persistence of ethnic behavioural characteristics is a barrier to social mobility and socioeconomic success", then the customary census definition of ethnicity is not the appropriate variable. Rather, some variable needs to be employed that indicates the degree of ethnic identity (or ethnic connectedness) of the individual. The maintenance of strong ethnic identities and attachment to ethnic life styles cannot be detected by the standard census variable. Additional census variables must be employed to tap the multidimensional nature of ethnic identity. A few tests of the significance of "ethnic connectedness" for behavioural assimilation and socioeconomic achievement, using a multidimensional definition of ethnic identity, have been made, using census and survey data (Kalbach and Richard 1985). Results have been encouraging in demonstrating that a better measure of ethnic identification can produce evidence of stronger correlations between ethnicity and various types of social and economic behaviour, particularly for first generation immigrants (Kalbach and Richard 1981).

The research literature continues to demonstrate the presence of significant differences between ethnic groups in the nature and extent of their labour force participation. What research has not yet fully clarified is the extent to which cultural factors (including ethnocentrism) are responsible for the remaining unexplained residual variance after structural differences have been accounted for. Standard regression analyses that use the census type ethnic origin variable as one of several ascribed status characteristics have provided little if any support for the salience of ethnicity for social mobility. Whether or not the incorporation of more appropriate multidimensional measures of ethnicity – that would better reflect current identification and ethnic community ties – would produce different results remains to be seen. In any event, there

are still too many unanswered questions regarding the possible consequences of endorsing "multiculturalism" as official policy for a society which has been historically bilingual and bicultural.

Implications of Ethnic Persistence for Social Mobility

Ethnic segregation, or concentration, in the occupational structure appears to arise from differences in the distribution of a variety of ascribed and achieved characteristics in the population, as well as from a rather persistent, underlying tendency on the part of Canadians to interact with one another in terms of perceived differences in social status and desirability (Berry, Kalin and Taylor 1976). Both recognizing and legitimizing ethnic differences, while at the same time trying to minimize ethnocentric effects through an official policy of "multiculturalism" and tolerance for cultural diversity, can create some potentially troubling countervailing tendencies. Official support for the recognition and value of ethnic diversity will, of course, tend to enhance the self esteem of many minority group members and increase ethnic group cohesiveness. On the other hand, this may work at cross purposes with efforts to promote the further convergence of ethnic occupational structures and a more equitable state of social and economic integration. Attempts to reduce ethnic group differences that contribute to ethnic inequality and ethnic stratification will require minimization of differences in those achieved social and economic characteristics that have significance for social mobility. Simply put, efforts to minimize structural and behavioural differences between ethnic groups should tend to maximize equality of access to the opportunity structures.

Among the many ascribed and achieved statuses thought to have relevance for social mobility in Canadian society, education continues to be singled out as having the greatest salience. While education is generally treated as a variable, independent of ethnic or cultural origins, "Canadian" education is usually implied. Studies of the effects of age at immigration clearly suggest the advantages of Canadian educational experience with respect to future social mobility. In addition, the generally negative relationship between education and prejudice would suggest the important role that Canadian educational institutions must play in the fight to reduce ethnic and racial intolerance.

Reducing Ethnic Group Differences

Specialized education in official language skills and job training have long been recognized as an important means of promoting social assimilation and economic integration of Canada's immigrant populations. Programs of this type should be continued and even strengthened, given the increasing numbers of immigrants who are neither English nor French-speaking. There is, however, another means for enhancing the Canadian content of immigrants' education that could be more effectively exploited. Many foreign students are being educated in Canada today at the secondary level in preparation for university entrance. They are receiving a basic Canadian education, in essence being Canadianized in terms of attitudes and values, as well as their social behaviour. These foreign students have already demonstrated their ability to adapt to Canadian society, yet have been given little encouragement to become Canadian

residents or citizens. Foreign student programs at the elementary and secondary levels could be enlarged to Canada's advantage.

Another strategy, which at first glance might seem to be confusing cause and effect, would be to directly attack the ethnic groups' occupational characteristics. Ethnic occupational concentrations have, in part, been the consequence of highly selective immigration procedures with respect to occupational and educational qualifications. Perhaps the occupational suitability of immigrants should be determined at an "aggregate" level rather than on an individual basis, i.e., the criteria for selection could be in terms of matching the immigrant groups' overall occupational profile with that of the total labour force. Business and industry would have to place more emphasis on the general adaptability and motivation of immigrants, and increase their utilization of "on the job" training programs to provide for their specialized needs to a greater degree than they have done in the past. The short-term solution (i.e., relying on immigration to provide instant specialists) appears to have increased occupational concentration rather than dispersion over time. Such an approach would have some potential for developing greater occupational heterogeneity within the various ethnic populations and greater similarity between them.

Recent attempts to stimulate economic growth and create additional jobs by encouraging foreign business immigration and investment reflect innovative initiatives by the government to take greater advantage of the financial resources of selected immigrants to bolster the economy. While most economic models assume that increased inputs of investment capital will generate more jobs, little attention appears to have been directed toward determining the possible distributional effects that various sources of foreign capital might have on the structure of the Canadian economy. Given the tendency towards greater institutional completeness that characterizes Asian communities in Canada, it would not seem unreasonable to expect that the benefits of Asian investment capital, as well as the creation of jobs by entrepreneurs of Asian origins, would be more or less limited to Asian communities and businesses. To the extent that this might occur, the input of foreign investment capital and manpower would be less effective in stimulating the national economy than it might otherwise be. Furthermore, the experience of the Italian community would suggest that, while greater institutional completeness might very well increase the opportunities for economic achievement and social mobility within the ethnic community, it might not contribute to any significant reduction in the social and economic inequalities experienced by those of Asian origins who chose to live outside their ethnic community.

Clearly, it is not sufficient just to identify and modify those selection criteria and immigration requirements that tend to produce ethnic concentrations or enclaves associated with social and economic inequality. Language programs for immigrants need to be strengthened and expanded to give them the level of official language skills needed to compete successfully in either the French or British-dominated sectors of society. These programs must reach into the homes to include the wives and other family members and relatives who are being drawn into the labour force in increasing numbers.

Concluding Comments

In summary, too much emphasis on the virtues of maintaining and preserving the uniqueness of Canada's diverse ethnic populations will make the task of reducing ethnic inequalities in the labour force more difficult. Multiculturalism should not be bought at the expense of Canadianization and a more equitable economic integration. It would not seem unreasonable to assume that most non-refugees are motivated to immigrate to achieve a better way of life or a higher standard of living (or both). Becoming less ethnic and more Canadian as a result of immigration should be viewed as a normal expectation by immigrants as well as by those born in Canada. There is a growing accumulation of Canadian research that shows that assimilation tends to enhance the immigrant's chances of achieving a higher level of integration and greater socioeconomic success. Analysis of both census and survey data have shown this to be the case for several of Canada's older immigrant populations; i.e., the Germans and Ukrainians (Kalbach and Richard 1985).

The evidence for Canada's "newer" European immigrants with sufficient experience in Canada to provide samples large enough for statistical analysis is still thin, but is consistent with the findings for the "old" European immigrant groups. With increasing proportions of non-Europeans expected among arriving immigrants in the years ahead, ethnic and cultural differences may be expected to become more significant obstacles to successful social and economic integration and achievement for Canada's new arrivals. Clearly, there is a need for additional research on the more "visible" of recent immigrant groups, especially with reference to existing ethnocentric attitudes and their effects on adjustment and acceptance by those already established in Canada. It may become increasingly important to orient new immigrants to the basically bicultural and bilingual nature of Canadian society and to what is expected of them to ensure fairer access to the social and economic opportunity structures. Continuation of a multicultural policy may require more support for programs to promote ethnic and racial tolerance, and to place a greater emphasis on maintenance of cultural diversity within the basic bilingual and bicultural framework of Canada. Neither of these requirements should undermine the need for new immigrants to become Canadians.

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